

Bringing Up Baby (1938) Hawks

P Michell, 2020

A screwball comedy. [Howard Hawks](#) thought there weren't any "normal" people in the movie, and everyone was a "screwball."

Origin – baseball – type of pitch / throw.

Oddly the film was a failure upon release, becoming successful in the 1950s via television and then French Cahiers du Cinema critics. Now considered not only one of the best screwball comedies, but one of best comedies on film. Particularly so as it was made under the Hays code of censorship, yet is so 'revealing' of things being censored.

The film sits in three periods of time: Homage to the silent era of comedy / vaudeville. Deliberately making Cary Grant look like Harold Lloyd, use of other 'old school' comedians in the film. Contemporary film connections such as Grant's film 1937 film, *The Awful Truth*. Future connections with feminism and the 1960s where women would become more equal and acceptance of gay community.

Synopsis:

Katharine Hepburn and Cary Grant star in this inspired comedy about a madcap heiress with a pet leopard who meets an absent-minded palaeontologist and unwittingly makes a fiasco of both their lives. David Huxley (Grant) is the stuffy palaeontologist who needs to finish an exhibit on dinosaurs and thus land a \$1 million grant for his museum. At a golf outing with his potential benefactors, Huxley is spotted by Susan Vance (Hepburn) who decides that she must have the reserved scientist at all costs. She uses her pet leopard, Baby, to trick him into driving to her Connecticut home, where a dog wanders into Huxley's room and steals the vital last bone that he needs to complete his project. The real trouble begins when another leopard escapes from the local zoo and Baby is mistaken for it, leading Huxley and Susan into a series of harebrained and increasingly more insane schemes to save the cat from the authorities. Inevitably, the two end up in the local jail, where things get even more out of hand: Susan pretends to be the gun moll to David's diabolical, supposedly wanted criminal. Director Howard Hawks delivers a funny, fast-paced, and offbeat story, enlivened by animated performances from the two leads, in what has become a definitive screwball comedy. ~ Don Kaye, Rovi (Rotten Tomatoes – 93% Tomatometer, 90% Audience score)

Creative talent

Howard Hawks – directed 47 films inc many classics: Scarface (1932), Twentieth Century (1934), Only Angels Have Wings (1939), Sergeant York (1941), To Have and Have Not (1944), Red River (1948), I Was a Male war Bride (1949), Then Thing (u.c.) (1951), Ransom of Red Chief from O'Henry's Full House (1952), Gentlemen Prefer Blondes (1953)

Although [John Ford](#)--his friend, contemporary and the director arguably closest to him in terms of his talent and output--told him that it was he, and not Ford, who should have won the 1941 Best Director Academy Award (for [Sergeant York](#) (1941)), the great Hawks never won an Oscar in competition and was nominated for Best Director only that one time, despite making some of the best films in the Hollywood canon. The Academy eventually made up

for the oversight in 1974 by voting him an honorary Academy Award, in the midst of a two-decade-long critical revival that has gone on for yet another two decades. To many cineastes, Hawks is one of the faces of American film and would be carved on any film pantheon's Mt. Rushmore honouring America's greatest directors, beside his friend Ford and [Orson Welles](#) (the other great director who Ford beat out for the 1941 Oscar). It took the French "Cahiers du Cinema" critics to teach America to appreciate one of its own masters, and it was to the Academy's credit that it recognized the great Hawks in his lifetime.

Russel Metty – Cinematographer – 173 films.

Famous for: *Spartacus* (1960), *The Omega Man* (1971), *Touch of Evil* (1958). Ten Douglas Sirk films of the 1950s inc: *All That Heaven Allows* (1955) and *Written on the Wind* (1956), etc.

A superb craftsman who worked with such top directors as [John Huston](#), [Stanley Kubrick](#), [Steven Spielberg](#) and [Orson Welles](#), was born in Los Angeles on September 20, 1906. Entering the movie industry as a lab assistant, he apprenticed as an assistant cameraman and graduated to lighting cameraman at RKO Radio Pictures in 1935. Metty's ability to create effects with black-and-white contrast while shooting twilight and night were on display in two films he shot for Welles, [The Stranger](#) (1946) and the classic [Touch of Evil](#) (1958), the latter showing his mastery of complex crane shots. (Metty shot additional scenes for Welles' second masterpiece, [The Magnificent Ambersons](#) (1942),

RKO Art Design Department -

Whilst Van Nest Polgase's name appears on most RKO films until 1941 as Art Director, in fact he only did rough sketches which were then realised by various specialists often with architectural training. In its heyday 150 people were employed at RKO art dept. Significant talent included Carroll Clark and Perry Ferguson. Carroll Clark, who deserves at least an equal share of the credit for the Art Deco/Hollywood Moderne 'RKO look'. Most notably on famous sets for the Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers films. Perry Ferguson created the sets for *Citizen Kane*.

The fact that Hawks later built a house based on the plans for the one in 'baby' suggests serious architectural design. Likely Perry Ferguson did this film.

More here:

<https://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/vintage-set-design-article>

Trivia

Australian connection – May Robson (plays Aunt Elizabeth) born in NSW in 1858. In over 60 films and many more stage appearances. She was known as "The Grand Old Lady of the American Stage". Only moved to Hollywood (and movies) in 1927 aged 69! Quote: "Both professions are so irregular that each always would feel sorry for the other, and then there would be perfect harmony." [1935, explaining her advice that actresses should marry doctors]

The scene in which Susan's dress is ripped was inspired by something that happened to [Cary Grant](#). He was at the Roxy Theater one night and his pants zipper was down when it caught on the back of a woman's dress. Grant impulsively followed her. When he told this story to [Howard Hawks](#), Hawks loved it and put it into the film.

Though [Katharine Hepburn](#) never received royalties as an actress in the film, because she was a part investor, the film did provide a financial return for her (and still does for her estate).

Susan has a "wardrobe malfunction" at a fancy gathering, which strips her lower body down to the panties. Such a state of undress was rarely seen in films approved by the Hays Office Code. This was the Hollywood self-regulation board which decreed what could or could not be shown in all "mainstream" USA movies from the mid 1930s to the mid 1960s.

Before the movie was released [Cary Grant](#) had been worried that he might never become a major star after all, since he was already nearly 34 at the time of filming and younger actors like [Errol Flynn](#) and [James Stewart](#) were established stars.

[Howard Hawks](#) said that he failed at making a good comedy here because of the characters were too "madcap", with no straight men/women to ground it. This comment may have resulted from his disappointment at the film's commercial failure at the time of its release, although many now consider it Hawks' best film.

[Christopher Reeve](#) based his performance as Clark Kent in [Superman](#) (1978) and its three sequels on [Cary Grant](#)'s character David Huxley from this film.

To build their New England-style home, [Howard Hawks](#)' wife Slim used the set plans from his film [Bringing Up Baby](#) (1938).

Fun fact: it's a treat to watch Hepburn play golf in this film. She was a gifted athlete, and fourteen years later she would play a professional golfer and tennis player in [Pat and Mike](#) (1952).

Some Fun Background Stuff:

Bringing Up Baby is a masterpiece of the screwball repertoire, and one that is considered a treasure in cinematic history. Directed by Howard Hawks, and written for the screen by Dudley Nichols and Hagar Wilde, the film was based on a short story that appeared in the 1937 edition of Collier's magazine. To read Wilde's story, please click [here](#).

For years, RKO had been trying to resurrect Hepburn's waning popularity. A glimpse of Katharine at the beginning of her career show an ambitious actress with great potential. When turmoil struck, the image of Hepburn gradually morphed into a picture of a struggling star who was yearning for consummation. The studio thought that *Bringing Up Baby* would rescue Hepburn from destruction, but instead, the film was deemed unsuccessful, resulting in Katharine Hepburn being labeled "Box Office Poison".

In addition to Katharine Hepburn and Cary Grant, *Bringing Up Baby* is famous for its stellar ensemble cast. Howard Hawks insisted that prominent players fill out the supporting roles. Charlie Ruggles, who had a successful career on stage and film was on loan from Paramount Pictures to play the role of Major Horace Applegate. Barry Fitzgerald, who would go on to become one of Hollywood's most beloved character actors was assigned the role of Aloysius Gogarty, the gardener, while the Australian born actress, May Robson was hired to play Susan's aunt, Elizabeth Carlton Random. Even Baby and George were portrayed by animal acting veterans. Skippy, AKA, Asta, the famous Wire Fox Terrier who charmed audiences

worldwide in an array of movies, including *The Thin Man* films, in which he was best known for, was signed up to play George, Mrs. Random's dog, and Nissa, the leopard, who had worked in films for eight years was cast to play, Baby. Originally, the story required a panther, but when the task of finding a panther proved to be erroneous, Baby was changed to a leopard, and because Nissa was already trained, she was immediately hired.

[\(https://crystalkalyana.wordpress.com/2017/11/10/bringing-up-baby-1938-2/\)](https://crystalkalyana.wordpress.com/2017/11/10/bringing-up-baby-1938-2/)

The Screwball Comedy Genre

After *It Happened One Night* (1934), which is generally considered to be the first screwball, the genre flourished throughout the 1930s and into the early 1940s. The elements that make up screwball include farcical situations, witty, quick repartee, slapstick, mistaken or fluid identities, secrets, mismatches in social class, journeys away from civilization and into the country, a battle of the sexes romance plot where the madcap woman pursues the man and sometimes "liberates him" with her wackiness, and a topsy-turvy world where normal reality doesn't apply. Keep these characteristics and tropes in mind, and see how many you can spot. Hint: most classic screwballs such as [Hands Across the Table](#) (1935), [My Man Godfrey](#) (1936), [Easy Living](#) (1937), *Topper* (1937), [Midnight](#) (1939), *His Girl Friday* (1940), [The Lady Eve](#) (1940), and [The Palm Beach Story](#) (1942) contain some of these genre conventions; *Bringing Up Baby* has them all.

<https://theblondeatthefilm.com/2015/04/28/bringing-up-baby/>

Worth looking at with full description of the film from [BlondeAtTheFilm.com](#):
(Edited end notes)

Bringing Up Baby is an incredibly rich, dense movie, and you can find a lot if you start looking. The title, for example, is not as simple as you might think. "Bringing Up Baby" could refer to raising the leopard as in "raising a child." This interpretation makes the title a joke, since David and Susan are pretty terrible at caring for Baby. Or it could be read as bringing up a topic of conversation, as in "let's talk about the leopard," which generally results in chaos. After all, it was when Susan "brought up" her leopard on the phone with David that things really got going. If only Susan had "brought up Baby" to her aunt! All their trouble (and fun) could have been avoided. Less likely is the idea of "bringing up Baby" to New York, as in sending Baby north from South America where Susan's brother caught him. I like to think it's a combination.

Structurally, the movie features several instances of doubling and repetition. For example, the film is tidily bookended with Grant in the museum in the beginning and the end. And both times he's with his fiancée, though it's not the same woman.

The doubling continues throughout the film: Susan drives away with David riding on the running board twice, she steals two different cars, and the pair end up beneath a bedroom window at two different houses. There are two nearly identical purses, two confused phone calls with Alice, two missed appointments with Mr. Peabody, and of course two leopards! Even Miss Swallow and Susan could be considered doubles. They look alike, though they are the complete opposites in personality.

Much of the repetition contributes to the comedy—two purses and two leopards creates a comedic gold mine of confusion and mistakes, and poor David’s refrain of “I’ll be with you in a minute, Mr. Peabody!” becomes a running joke.

There’s a lot happening just below the surface, too. For example, you can read a great deal into David and Susan’s evening in the woods. Once outside of the city, and freed from the societal confines of the house and the adult world they inhabit with Aunt Elizabeth and Major Applegate, the pair can finally “get back to Nature” and fall in love.

They experience an almost prehistoric world (perfect for our paleontologist) of wild animals, the thrill of the hunt, fire, water (if a character gets dunked, you have to mention a cleansing baptism—it’s a rule of textual analysis), and honest emotion and conversation.

Civilization intrudes and controls; real connection and truth are easier to find in the wild. That could be a subtitle of screwball comedy—remove the constraints and let characters be weird and wild, and you’ll discover what is important and real.

You can also have fun with the “intercostal clavicle” that David needs for his brontosaurus. This oft-mentioned fossil is not a real bone. It’s an invented body part with a nonsensical name that is perfect for this film and genre: *intercostal* means “between ribs” and *clavicle* is another word for “collarbone.” Obviously you can’t have an “intercostal” clavicle; even a brontosaurus doesn’t keep his shoulders inside his ribs. The screenwriters could have used the name of an actual dinosaur bone, but instead they opted for a name that is as wacky and illogical as the film.

The intercostal clavicle brings us to the sexual reading. The word “bone” presents multiple and varied instances of innuendo.

For instance, poor David gets his bone the day of his wedding, loses it almost immediately, and spends the rest of the film searching for it with Susan’s eager assistance. Susan even dubs him “Mr. Bone,” which is rather funny considering it’s the one thing he doesn’t have.

To be fair, “Mr. Bone” also works as a reference to the minstrel show stock character “Mr. Bones” who was a goofy joke teller and singer. David also jokes and sings in this film, so the name could just be a reference to his character. But I doubt it.

The name of the leopard is suggestive, too, especially since Miss Swallow told David that their marriage “must entail no domestic entanglements of any kind,” and that the brontosaurus “will be our child.” In other words, no sex. So, if David chooses Miss Swallow, he gets an old fossil, but if he chooses Susan, he gets a living, breathing “Baby” (and sex). Beyond that comparison, it’s interesting that David and Susan spend so much of the film searching for the leopard. You could suggest that in “searching for Baby” they are also “searching for baby,” or the love, marriage, and sex (not always in that order) that lead to babies.

You can go pretty far with the sexual reading; indeed, in [Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage](#), Stanley Cavell labels the film a “sexual allegory” all about marriage and sexuality. For example, when discussing the collapse of the fossil at the end of the film, he asks, “Is it meant to register the perimeter of human happiness, [David and Susan are in love, but David can’t have both the girl and the dinosaur] or the happenstance of it—like the breaking of the glass at the end of a Jewish wedding? Both surely comment upon the demise of virginity, but in this film it is the woman who directly causes it.”

I’m not sure I’d go that far and suggest that the broken fossil symbolizes the physical consummation of their relationship; it is more likely to me that the destruction of the brontosaurus illustrates the end of Miss Swallow and David’s relationship (she did call it their child), and proves that David no longer cares more about his work than anything else. Susan is his priority now, as demonstrated by their embrace after the dinosaur has crashed to the ground.

You can see why this film presents many different subtexts and readings. Of course, *Bringing Up Baby* is wonderfully entertaining at face value, too, so watch it however you like. And if you enjoy it, you can take a look at two loose remakes, *What’s Up, Doc?* with Barbra Streisand in 1972 and *Who’s That Girl?* with Madonna in 1987.

With its lackluster release, this film might have been forgotten had influential critics and scholars not resurrected it. In the 1950s and 60s, Howard Hawks became a favorite *auteur* of André Bazin and the *Cahiers* crowd, which prompted a re-examination of his work. Other critics, filmmakers, and scholars discovered that screwball comedy as a genre was quite interesting, and of course two mega-icons like Katharine Hepburn and Cary Grant helped bring people back to the film. Today, it is recognized as a classic and a gem of the screwball genre, and ranked 88th on the American Film Institute’s “100 Years...100 Movies” list in 2007.

I didn’t know any of this when I first saw *Bringing Up Baby* as a kid. All I knew was that it made me laugh, and I loved watching it. Since then, my love for this movie has only grown. And as the credits roll, I have to agree with Cary Grant: “I’ve never had a better time!”

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